

Open SESAME: science centre inaugurated in Jordan

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Jordan's King Abdullah II (L) attends the launch of The International Centre for Synchrotron-Light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME), an international research centre northwest of Amman, on May 16, 2017

Jordan's King Abdullah II on Tuesday formally launched an international research centre whose members include experts from around the world including arch-rivals Iran and Israel.

The International Centre for Synchrotron-Light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East, known by the acronym SESAME, "is the first research centre of its kind in the region," said the royal court.

The facility, located in Balqa province, just northwest of Amman, "will house the first nuclear-powered accelerator in the world," said SESAME council president Chris Lewellyn Smith.

"The centre is expected to attract a large number of scientists from the region," Smith said, adding it had "so far received 55 scientific research projects on the use of nuclear accelerators".

SESAME was set up on the model of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN)—Europe's top physics laboratory—and construction work on the \$100 million centre started in 2003.

It was developed under the auspices of UNESCO and officially came into existence in April 2004.

Jordan was chosen from among five countries for the project, which was funded mostly by the member countries and the European Union.

The project's website says that SESAME is a "third-generation" [synchrotron light source](#) aimed at promoting "scientific and technological excellence in the Middle East".

Its mission is to "prevent or reverse the brain drain by enabling world-class scientific research in subjects ranging from biology, archaeology and medical sciences."

SESAME also seeks to "build scientific and cultural bridges between diverse societies, and contribute to a culture of peace through international cooperation in science," the website says.

Among the project's members are arch-rivals Israel and Iran, in addition to Cyprus, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan, Turkey and the Palestinian Authority.

Despite their deep hostilities, experts from Israel and Iran have served two-year terms as vice presidents of the SESAME council.

In 2010, one Iranian member of SESAME, Majid Shahriari, was killed in Tehran, with Iran accusing Israel of assassinating the nuclear scientist.

Seyed Mahmoud Reza Aghamiri served as vice president from December 2011 to May 2014 when Eliezer Rabinovici, a physics professor at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, replaced him.

Members Cyprus and Turkey also do not have diplomatic relations, like Iran and Israel.

The centre also has 17 observers, who have an advisory role and include the European Union, China and the United States.

The Jordanian king was given a tour of the facility on Tuesday and was briefed on the technology used there, the royal court said in a statement.

Synchrotron uses a high-resolution X-ray to delve below the surface and identify minute details.

The centre has three accelerators that can propel electrons up to 2.5 billion electron volts.

The chairman of the Jordan Atomic Energy Agency, Khaled Toukan, "pointed to the political, technical and financial challenges that faced the project's task force," the statement added.

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